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Material History: Record Collecting in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Introduction

The rekindling popularity of the vinyl record and record collecting provide a counternarrative to the ideals of technological progress and supersession, signalling the paradoxical return of a physical music format in the digital realm where “the fetish of newness is at its most aggressive” (Tischleder and Wasserman 7). In this way, the vinyl record provides a disruptive lens through which to question media history as “a history of obsolescence, where new media displace and redefine older media” and explore how “obsolescence resists becoming obsolete” (Tischleder and Wasserman 2). Magaouda (29) argues that the dematerialisation of music media has reconfigured the role of materiality in media practices and has seen physical formats such as the vinyl record “bite back” as mediators of distinct listening practices and unique material relationships to music. Against the background of on-demand streaming services and retro nostalgia in the digital age (Hogarty), record collecting may be dismissed as a resistant and obsolete collecting practice. However, as this article will explore, record collecting can be characterised as a highly social practice, providing a means to communicate identity and taste, maintain a sense of the past, and orient the social life and personal history of the collector.

This article reports on the results of ethnographic research investigating the record collections of some young millennial music fans to locate the position and significance of vinyl records in their social lives as a legacy media format. To do this, I examine three key capacities of vinyl record collections in evoking autobiographical memories, maintaining personal histories and anchoring a sense of the past. The significance of personal record collections and collecting practices was investigated in a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with a group of self-identified record collectors. The sentiments of the collector in describing their collecting can be found to reveal their acquisitions as transactions within the spheres of commodity culture and the gift economy, articulating the renewed appeal of vinyl records in the digital age. This perspective of the social meanings and media practices surrounding vinyl records in the digital age highlight the formats significance in understanding the complex trajectories of media history.

Vinyl Records

Succeeding the shellac gramophone record in the 1948, the vinyl record was the dominant format for commercial music distribution until it was largely replaced by the Compact Disc and the audio cassette in the 1980s and 1990s (Osbourne 81). Vinyl sales remained low until 2007 (Richter), when the withering sales of cassette singles and the rising popularity of alternative guitar music saw renewed interest in the seven-inch vinyl record (Osbourne 140). The popularity of both seven-inch and twelve-inch vinyl records have continued to rise into the 2010s, spurred on by industry and artist endorsements on Record Store Day (Harvey) and the return of in-house vinyl production by major labels (Ellis-Petersen). In Australia, vinyl sales generated \$15.1 million dollars in 2016, showing 75% growth over the previous year (Australian Recording Industry Association). It is in this way that the resurgent trajectory of vinyl records has come to be understood as an allegorical case for broader debates around media materiality in the digital age.

Vinyl records can be regarded as unique and highly collectable based on their material affordances. The aesthetic appeal of large album cover art has been described as a crucial component to the enduring popularity and resurgence of the format (Bartmanski and Woodward 123) and this is often reflected in the display of a collection within domestic spaces, enabling the musical taste of the collector to be observed and admired by others (Giles, Pietrykowski, and Clark 436). Further, the materiality of vinyl records necessitates a distinctive set of actions for music playback, engaging the listener physically in a different way to digital interfaces (Bartmanski and Woodward 37). In their analysis of the resurgent cultural and social value of vinyl records, Bartmanski and Woodward expand on the importance of materiality and ownership of vinyl records for collectors in serving socially communicative and identity affirming processes, affording “opportunities to revisit and remember one’s past ...”, such opportunities are also useful for understanding and defining self as having a biography of cultural consumption or tastes” (107). The unique material affordances differentiate vinyl records from other music media formats and have cemented their position as “the collectable format” (Shuker 57, emphasis in original). Marshall expands on this notion, writing that “the greater materiality – and fragility – of the vinyl album allows its history to be inscribed onto the material object – more so than with a CD, and much more so than with a digital file” (67). It is through such material affordances that vinyl records communicate their own histories and those of the collector.

The unique material biographies of vinyl records are crucial in understanding how record collections potentially afford the collector a sense of the past. Material traces such as the wear and tear of the album cover, the marks of a previous owner or artist’s signatures obtained on its surface chronicle the journey of a record as it passes through stages of commodification and circulation before finally entering the collector’s possession. It is the physical biography of a vinyl album that differentiates it from other identical copies in the eyes of the collector, reflecting the distinctive “aura” (Benjamin, *The Work of Art* 220) of the individual object. Physically imbued with history and “social life” (Appadurai 3), vinyl records can materialise and reflect the personal history of the collector within the collection. These descriptions reveal the renewed position of the vinyl record as a uniquely collectable media format in the digital age, providing a framework to explore the significance of the format in the social lives of young millennial record collectors.

Record Collecting

In the seminal essay on book collecting *Unpacking My Library*, Walter Benjamin describes the relationship that forms between the items of a collection and the owner. He explains the process in which objects enter the collection as the infusion of object with the biography of the collector, allowing the collector to “live in them” (Benjamin 67). There are few domains in which the significance of this relationship is more pronounced than in characterising the music collector and their relationship with their collection. Popular music represents a complex cultural form closely connected to concepts of identity, belonging, affect, personal, and cultural memory (Bennet and Rogers 37). Characterised as a “critical bedrock in everyday life”, music and its many mediated modalities can be seen to shape everyday “sociocultural sensibilities ...”, influencing in fundamental ways how individuals understand themselves as cultural beings over time” (Bennet and Rogers 38). The personal record collection remains one of the most popular and well-established forms of musical collection. Moreover, the vinyl record maintains an enduring popularity in the digital age at the centre of specific musical cultures and as a repository of personal and cultural history.

Roy Shuker’s discussion of the contemporary record collector provides a valuable insight into the identity founding capabilities of record collecting as a social practice (331). Shuker orients his findings against popularised notions of the record collector represented in Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*; male; obsessive and socially incompetent, before challenging this stereotype in exploring the connection between the social practice of record collecting and a retrospective sense of self and the past (311). In this way, a record collection may be appraised as an “attempt to preserve both the past and memories of the past” (Montano 2). Significantly, Shuker found that some collectors emphasised the social nature of their collecting practice, citing collecting as the foundation of close social relationships with friends and family (326). It is through these social dimensions of record collecting practice that the reconfigured position of vinyl records can be understood as an ongoing project of identity, taste and personal history.

Gift Economy and Commodity Culture

Entry into the collection is a pivotal transition in the biography of an object and a “privileged moment” in the life of a collector (Marshall 67). For the record collector, new and re-pressed records lining the shelves of record stores, curated collections for sale or trade at record fairs, vast online marketplaces, and divested selections of tip-shops and garage sales represent troves of opportunity and potential for collectors to explore musical genres, uncover rare or unique records and to increase their own musical scholarship. Conversely, receiving a record as a gift or inheriting a collection of records from a family member represents a mode of acquisition which is less discussed and concerns a very different set of motivations and associations for the collector. These different circumstances of acquisition can be broadly categorised as transactions within the circuits of commodity culture and social actions within the gift economy and play a pivotal role in the imbuing of collection objects with the personal history of the collector.

Lewis Hyde demarcates the boundaries between these the two systems of merit, finding “A commodity has value ... A gift has worth” (78). In furthering this distinction, Hyde describes transactions within commodity culture as expressions of individuality and identity, enabling upwards mobility and changes to identity, while the gift economy concerns the strengthening of social ties, reaffirming cultural traditions and may reflect sentiments of nostalgia (68). In an age of digital music, the physicality of records enables them to be move through the gift economy in ways in which digital files cannot. While digital files may be gifted in a token sense via gift cards or transferred electronically, they struggle to communicate “worth” to the receiver in the same way as a tangible gift (Harvey et al.). It is in this

sense that the “bonding power” of records which enter the collection as a gift can be understood from the more detached transactions within commodity culture (Hyde 86).

As a transaction within the channels of commodity culture, a vinyl record may be utilised as a symbolic object to communicate musical taste, fandom and the cultural expertise of the collector which may not be “adequately signified socially merely by storage of digital files and players” (Bartmansk and Woodward 107). This signifying ability is afforded by the considerable material presence of the vinyl record cover and the collection within domestic spaces. In addition to social display, one interviewee explained how their collection invites a historical perspective of their own evolving musical tastes:

I’ll keep buying more records that I like, and even if I don’t like the band later I’ll keep the vinyl anyway because at some point I did like them. It’s like a chronological order of stuff that I listen to. I’ll always go back to it as a personal history. I’ve always loved music so having that there gives me a perspective what I’ve been into. (Eddie, 21)

Culture and taste are revealed as dimensions of the self through the collection, revealing a trajectory of continuity and change over time (Bartmansk and Woodward 107). As a materialisation of “personal history”, the record collection may be described as a “technology of the self” in which music may be experienced in association with “the past” and is therefore part of “producing oneself as a coherent being over time” and a “cuing in how to proceed” into the future. (DeNora 66). In addition to this retrospective view of personal musical development, Eddie also revealed how interpersonal connections come to become associated with records in his collections through the gift economy:

I have a couple of records that friends have bought for me, and that in itself I find is really nice – its someone that cares that you are into music and knows some bands that I respect and that I am into. Often, we will chuck it on and listen together. (Eddie 21)

Bundled up in the relationship between musical taste and the collection, records received as gifts from friends demonstrate the nurturing or affirmation of social bonds which may be then further solidified through shared listening experience (Brown and Sellen 37). Here, the sentimental value of the gift is privileged over its monetary value, revealing its “worth” within the gift economy (Hyde 78). These social connections embedded within record collections and can be understood further through the inheritance of a collection as it is passed down by familial generations.

Material Memory: Inheritance and Loss

If ownership can be characterised as “the most intimate relationship one can have to objects”, then the process of inheriting a collection marks an important moment of divestment and transfer of ownership and responsibility from the collector to another (Benjamin, *Unpacking* 67). One interviewee who inherited his late father’s record collection highlighted the powerful bond between object and collector, describing the collection as a “part” of his father that remains:

A lot of it my dad really cherished it y’know? I feel like he’s gone, if this goes, it’s like another part of him that’s gone forever. And no one likes to think of death and what happens after you’re gone and forgotten – but the vinyl lives on, what you don’t take with you when you die is everything, and that is what stays. (Simon 22)

Records inherited from a deceased family member occupy an eminent position within the collection as items infused with the social life, bearing the material traces of past ownership. Moreover, collectors may forge a sense of permanence as the collection exists beyond their own lifetime (Marshall 65). Importantly, the collection maintains a connection between the interviewee, their late father, and a sense of the past as a form of memorial. In this way, the economic value of the collection gives way to its priceless sentimental and memorial worth for the interviewee, situating the inheritance of the collection clearly within the realm of the gift economy.

The worth and value of record collections as projects of identity and signifiers of the past can be further understood when interviewees were asked to consider the loss of their collections. One interviewee remarked on the loss of a collection in terms of invested time, effort and embedded sentimental worth:

I’d be devastated, it’s a killer – I don’t know how to say it. The music itself isn’t gone because you can get that elsewhere, but you just lose something that you’ve put so much time into. You’ve lost the physicality. And if there is something with heritage or sentimental value around a particular record then they are gone as well. It’s like any other sentimental item. (Dominic, 23)

The investment of time in curating and pursuing additions to the collection is a key part of the satisfaction associated with collecting. It is one of the features which has come to differentiate record collecting as a marker of music fandom and expertise in a digital age of instantaneous gratification and access, facilitated by streaming. Interestingly, the interviewee’s comment about the insignificant loss of “the music itself” resembles one of Benjamin’s original claims around collecting as a relationship between collector and object based not in functional value, but on a love for them as “the scene, the stage, of their fate” (*Unpacking* 62). Here, the value of the record collection in signifying musical fandom and identity is differentiated from sentimental worth, clearly highlighting the unique and diverse appeal of vinyl records as a collectable object in the digital age.

Wax Souvenirs

Beyond socially significant and identity affirming capacities of vinyl records, records may also serve as a memorial cue, conjuring specific episodic memories from the life narrative of the collector. One interviewee recited an encounter with a favourite band, prompted by a record cover adorned by signatures:

Interviewee: Yeah, the signed one is my favourite to look at. Aesthetically pleasing. It holds more value in my subjective categorisation. More sentimental value. I met the people that produced it and I got them to sign it for me.

Interviewer: Does it remind you of that time?

Interviewee: Yeah definitely, I’m hell bummed I didn’t get Kevin Parker to sign it! He’s the only one missing from the Frond album which he played drums on and he wasn’t at the rehearsal where the others were. (Elliot, 23)

The record sleeve and signatures serve as indexical verification of the experience for the collector and contribute both to the objects unique “aura” (Benjamin, *The Work of Art* 220), and the collector’s subjective evaluation of its sentimental ‘worth’. This use of records as memorial cues was common for a many of the collectors interviewed, with one interviewee purchasing a specific record as a memento or souvenir with the intention of later recollection:

Interviewee: I didn't buy this to listen to. I know I said that I buy vinyl to listen to, but this one was more to support them and to have a cool memento, because they are cool guys and I got to open their launch show.

Interviewer: Does it remind you of anything more specifically about that time?

Interviewee: It takes me back to the weeks leading up to the release, listening to the awful Spotify master, playing the release gig itself. I feel like my collection is something that I'm going to keep for a long time - I can see myself looking back in 5-10 years and having a chuckle. (Simon, 22)

These accounts resonate with the retrospective and evocative qualities of the collection as described by Benjamin, observing the way in which collectors "look into the object" and see connections to "moments and experiences in their life" (*Unpacking* 62). In this sense, vinyl records may serve an evidentiary function for the collector in a similar fashion to a souvenir, inviting reflection on past experiences from the owner and providing material proof of the experience when recounting to others.

Conclusion

This article has explored not only the resurgent position of vinyl records as a legacy music format, but the ways in which record collections can serve as sites of identity, memory and personal history. The role of materiality in media practices has been significantly transformed in the wake of cloud-based streaming services and has seen the vinyl record regarded as a highly collectable and unique physical media format in the digital age, capable of orienting the identities and social lives of music collectors. The descriptions gathered from interviews with millennial collectors reveal the intimate relationship between collector and collection, characterised by Benjamin (*Unpacking* 59), enabling the collection to materialise and reflect the personal history of the collector. As transactions within the gift economy, interviewees articulated the sentimental worth of their collections in affirming social bonds and familial connections. Moreover, interviewees explained how the patina of records within their collections reflect unique 'social life' (Appadurai 3) and serve as memorial cues for specific episodic memories. In this way, the enduring vinyl record is illustrative of the ways in which media history cannot be characterised as a simple trajectory of technological supersession and obsolescence, but as a complex system of evolution and redefinition of media practices, materiality and social meanings.

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